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# In the World but Not of It: Negotiating Evangelical Tradition and Gendered Identity in Contemporary Family Life

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**ABSTRACT:** Evangelical Protestants are an influential force in the world of politics, particularly in bringing debates over family values to the forefront of public life within the last thirty years. Their perspectives on gender have become a central point of contention in the so-called “culture wars” in American society. Recent research shows that the majority of evangelicals do not embody gender roles that fit within traditional, patriarchal, and gender essentialist models once central to evangelical thought on family life. Evangelicals live out their everyday family lives in much the same way as non-evangelicals and non-religious Americans. Research on evangelicals and subcultural identity theories is here placed within the context of individual and collective narrative identity formation to demonstrate how the fusion between the gender essentialist symbols that persist in evangelical perspectives on the family and the everyday tasks encountered in family life assists evangelicals in fulfilling the biblical mandate to be “in” the world but remain not “of” it. Evangelicals’ negotiations of gender roles have taken place through debates both within the subculture and within mainstream American culture and have led to the construction of a dominant form of evangelical gender practice that combines gender essentialist notions and the egalitarian treatment of both sexes in marital and familial relationships. This “symbolic traditionalism and practical egalitarianism” (Gallagher 2003), and the debates on gender in evangelicalism in general, demonstrate the role of evangelical agency in assessing both the biblical validity of various perspectives on gender and the efficacy of employing these gender views in their own lives.

**KEYWORDS:** evangelicals, family life, gender roles, identity

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## INTRODUCTION

American evangelical Protestants are a highly visible and vocal group in cultural debates concerning sexual ethics and family life in the United States. Known for their rigorous efforts toward protecting and perpetuating notions of “family values” and “pro-family” lifestyle choices, evangelicals stress the need to maintain their traditional family values for the sake of salvation and a healthy society (Gallagher 2003). Due to their strong emphasis on biblical text as the authoritative source of truth, many evangelicals believe that fulfilling and prosperous family lives are best sustained both through the practice of those values and through gender relations rooted in their understandings of the Bible.

Historically, evangelical perspectives on the family have been built upon traditional gender essentialist notions of what characterizes men and women and how these essential natures come together to form relationships and families.<sup>1</sup> The biblical basis of gender difference and the definition and practice of proper gender roles within family life (those believed to be supported by the Bible) have been paramount concerns for evangelical Protestants throughout their history (DeBerg 1990; Gallagher 2003; Bartkowski 2001); these concerns continue today, which is evident in the mobilization of evangelicals against attempts to redefine the traditional definition of marriage and other issues related to sexuality.

Conservative Protestant ideology on gender has historically lent support to gender essentialism and its institutionalization in American society (DeBerg 1990; Bendroth 1993). Given these tendencies, and the belief that evangelicals are to engage the world while remaining not of it, one might expect that evangelicals practice gender relations within the home that differ from those of their non-evangelical counterparts and those who do not profess any religious belief. One might assume that evangelicals exemplify gender roles that closely resemble the traditional and historically dominant gender essentialism in evangelical thought. This assumption would correlate with images of the evangelical male as head of house and as an authoritarian patriarch in the American social imagination (Bartkowski 2007, 155). However, as several studies report, such an image is far from reality. The everyday family practices of evangelicals closely resemble those of non-evangelical and even non-religious Americans. This similarity, however, raises an important question, one with significant implications for the future of evangelicalism: how do evangelicals

maintain the vital boundary that separates the ways of the world from an authentic bible-based way of life central to evangelical identity? To discover how evangelicals are constructing and maintaining individual and collective identities as members of the evangelical tradition amid the changes taking place in their gender relations and family lives, we must first examine the nature of evangelical thought on gender and the shifts taking place in family practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Methodological Considerations

Before discussing recent findings on changes within evangelical families, some of the methodological difficulties surrounding the study of American evangelicals should be addressed. Identification of a group is the necessary starting point from which all evaluations must follow, and identifying evangelicals as a population has proven problematic. Changes in the definitional parameters of the term “evangelical” yield widely divergent data, and thus also widely divergent conclusions concerning evangelicals’ beliefs and attitudes, as well as their social location within U.S. society (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Steensland et al. 2000). Given these difficulties, one must be extremely cautious when making claims about the status of and changes in evangelical belief, social location, and attitudes on specific cultural and political issues.

Various methods for defining “evangelical” are used by historians and sociologists of religion for determining who is defined as evangelical. One method used to identify evangelicals is based on whether they belong to a denomination historically connected to the theology of the evangelical movement that emerged out of Protestant fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Others, such as George Barna, use a particular set of theological ideas historically central to evangelicalism (e.g. that one is “born again,” believes in the virgin birth, and the inerrancy of scripture) to which one must assent in order to be considered evangelical (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). Self-identification requires survey respondents to place themselves in a religious category, although these categories are created by the researcher so that individuals must identify with whichever category best fits them out of the available options. Christian Smith et al. (1998) and the Evangelical Identity and Influence Project utilizes self-identification as a primary means of identifying evangelicals. In a study seeking to identify possible changes occurring in the evangelical subculture,



this method was preferred by the researchers who claimed that self-identification yields a wide variety of opinions among those who consider themselves to be a part of evangelicalism, but who do not fit into a historically evangelical denomination or affirm all of the theological points a researcher might establish. Religious traditions change over time, and studies that limit samples only to those respondents who fit into what has counted historically as evangelicalism may not account for such changes (Smith et al. 1998). One limitation of self-identification, however, is that it may yield too broad a sample by including individuals who only loosely identify with a tradition, or who identify incorrectly with traditions that are vastly different in character from their personal ideology.

Much of the data that follows in the discussion of evangelical family life resulted from the Evangelical Identity and Influence Project (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Smith 1998), which used self-identification and local knowledge sampling methods, in which churches known to religious locals as strongly evangelical in theological orientation were identified and respondents were drawn from those congregations. This procedure allowed for the inclusion of individuals who are members of historically evangelical denominations as well as those who self-identify with evangelicalism. The respondents in the self-identifying sample included only those who also stated that their faith was “extremely important” in their lives, and/or who claimed to attend church at least one to two times per month (Smith 1998). The information that follows was collected from those evangelicals who count themselves as participants within Protestant evangelical tradition and who claim high levels of religious commitment.

The use of self-identification in the Evangelical Identity and Influence Project does not appear to have resulted in an oversized sample by including individuals distinct from members of the evangelical tradition. Using Smith et al.’s method, about seven percent of the American population would fall under the classification “evangelical.” This is similar to George Barna’s findings, which resulted from the use of a strict set of belief criteria containing theological positions historically central in evangelical Protestant thought (Hackett and Lindsay 2008).

Telephone surveys performed as part of the Evangelical Identity and Influence Project were nationally representative, and in-depth follow-up interviews with respondents were performed in regions around the

United States. These interviewees were selected to create representative samples based on the composition of American evangelicalism in terms of race, denominational tradition, gender, and, where appropriate, theological orientation (“liberal/conservative”), with representative numbers established based on the results of national surveys including the General Social Survey. Follow-up interviewees were chosen based on their geographical availability (in order to ease travel difficulties) and were therefore not randomly selected, and more interviews were performed in urban or highly populated areas than in rural areas. Smith et al. do not believe the data are biased due to this imbalance, claiming that the in-depth interviewees are representative of randomly-selected evangelicals from the national phone surveys because “no significant differences were found between the groups in sex, race, age, education, income, marital status, regional location, or employment status. The only significant difference ... [is] the population of their county of residence” (Smith et al. 1998, 227).

Problematic here is that other research has shown that context—in terms of the theological orientation of individuals living in a given area—affects the beliefs that individuals hold on certain issues; people may be influenced by the beliefs of their neighbors even if their neighbors’ perspectives differ. Laura M. Moore and Reeve Vanneman (2003) found that those who do not share in the religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices of Christian fundamentalists but who live in states with a large fundamentalist population tend to hold more conservative attitudes on issues of gender than their counterparts who do not live in more religiously conservative states. In Smith et al.’s methodology, the worldview of an evangelical living in Minneapolis and of one living in rural Minnesota are assumed to be equivalent if the individuals resemble each other demographically. The demographic factors pointed out by Smith et al. are important for gauging whether a sample of individuals is representative of evangelicals from that region as a whole, but geographic location matters as well. While urban and rural respondents may respond similarly to questions in random phone surveys, further questioning in face-to-face interviews may provide insight that alters these apparent similarities. The contextual effects of living in a rural versus an urban area should be accounted for by including a representative number of evangelicals from non-urban and less highly-populated areas. The central South region also fell short of a representative number of interviews, leading to a reduction in input from southern evangelicals (Smith et al. 1998).



Black Protestants were represented in the study, with high response rates for the telephone surveys. However, the method of randomly selecting follow-up interviewees (used for white Protestants) proved problematic for obtaining a representative level of interviews with black Protestants, and the researchers resorted to using the social networks of black Protestants already known to them to find more participants. In the sample of black respondents, seventeen were selected this way while only seven were chosen at random, which results in a less diverse sample of black Protestant perspectives. All the respondents, from regions around the country, were from large metropolitan areas or major population centers within their states of residence (Smith et al. 1998, 224).

Despite these limitations, John P. Bartkowski's survey and ethnographic studies of evangelical couples in a large, multiple-church, evangelical congregation in Texas (2001) and his research on men within the evangelical men's movement the Promise Keepers (2004, 2007) support the findings of the EEIP for evangelical attitudes on gender.

Studies such as the large-scale Evangelical Identity and Influence Project and the work of Bartkowski, Sally Gallagher, and others to be discussed below, provide us with important insights into evangelical understandings of gender and how it is constructed and performed. Evangelicals and their gender perspectives are incredibly diverse, and so the findings and interpretations contained in these studies are assumed to be ultimately insufficient in providing a complete picture of gender in evangelicalism.

## DATA

Understandings of gender and gender roles have been contested throughout evangelical history. The scope of this article does not allow for even a cursory overview of the myriad changes in views of gender in evangelical intellectual traditions and the gender roles enacted within the evangelical subculture from the Victorian era into the present period. It can only be acknowledged that these complex changes have taken place and continue to do so.

The perspective that has dominated conservative Protestant thought on gender since the Victorian Era emphasizes that there are natural or innate differences between men and women, and that these gender-specific characteristics were instituted by God at the time of the

creation (Bartkowski 2001; DeBerg 1990). Gender essentialism in evangelicalism claims that inherent differences between the sexes exist. These differences have important implications for the particular God-ordained roles men and women are to fulfill on earth, as each person according to his or her sex has a certain general nature with certain talents and particular purposes in life. This conservative Protestant gender essentialism has strong historical ties to the separate spheres ideology of the nineteenth century, in which men and women were expected to have different domains of skill and concern: men in the public as family provider, and women in the private as homemaker and caretaker (DeBerg 1990). While individual men and women may function well within the sphere of the other, their God-given natures make them especially well-suited for their respective spheres. Essential differences between men and women are reportedly self-evident to many evangelicals as well as other conservative Protestants, supported by "common sense" and everyday experience within and outside of family life (Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2004a).

Conservative Protestant gender essentialism also believes mutual interdependence defines the nature of the relationship between the two sexes. The joining of their two contrary natures allows men and women to become whole through a partnership in which one has what the other needs, because their gender roles are "complementarian" (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999). Gender essentialism and the complementarian ideas that underlie notions of the traditional evangelical family emphasize the wife as nurturing mother and homemaker, and the husband as the provider, protector, and spiritual leader of the family.

Throughout its history, the central cornerstone of evangelical gender ideology has been "male headship," which places the father/husband at the head of the family and gives him authority over them but only within the boundaries outlined in the Bible. As the male head of the home, the father/husband carries the greatest responsibility for the family because he is expected to be first and foremost the spiritual leader of the household. The traditional understanding of headship also includes primary financial responsibility and final decision-making authority (Gallagher 2003). Associated with male headship is the idea of "female submission," which traditionally requires women to submit to the male head of the household. These distinct roles for men and women took the form of "separate spheres" during the early





twentieth century, in which women were expected to remain at home maintaining the house and raising their children while men worked in the public sphere to fulfill their primary role as breadwinners (DeBerg 1990). In the mid-twentieth century, similar domestic ideals emerged as the upheaval of World War II gave way to the post-War era and a longing for normalcy, coupled with economic prosperity that allowed women to leave the workplace as husbands returned home (Skolnick 1991). A single male breadwinner and a wife who could stay in the home became the ideal order for the evangelical household (Gallagher 2003, 39).

The egalitarian nature of many evangelical family gender relations today reflects gradual changes since the Victorian era. Conceptions of gender and their enactment have never gone contested. Concepts including evangelical feminism, also known as “biblical feminism,” have challenged traditional notions of male headship and female submission since mid-century, stemming from women’s reform groups that called for biblical equality in the nineteenth century. “Second-wave” biblical feminism of the mid-1970s became an important counterpoint to dominant assertions of innate gender roles through its rejection of a God-ordained, male-dominated hierarchy of creation; this school of thought emphasizes the influences of socialization and cultural processes in the production of gender categories and identities.

Although limited in its influence in mainstream evangelicalism, evangelical feminism emphasizes the need for mutual submission of men and women before God, a position that a minority of evangelicals today espouse (Gallagher 2003). Other influential social changes on evangelical gender views include widespread economic changes that occurred in the mid-1970s, which made a dual-earner household a necessity for many American families, and thus were detrimental to the continuation of the single breadwinner household model. The women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s also contributed to an environment that made assertions of male supremacy or gender hierarchies increasingly unpalatable in mainstream American culture (Bendroth 1993). In negotiating the debates within their own tradition and with the wider culture around them, evangelicals have constructed diverse, unique, and dynamic opinions of and ways of enacting gender today: many evangelicals combine gender essentialist ideologies with egalitarian family relations.

The data collected by Sara Gallagher (2003, 2004a, 2004b) and her collaborative efforts with Christian Smith (1999) suggest that evangelicals still largely adhere to gender essentialism in terms of their professed ideology concerning the nature of the sexes. This majority, however, also incorporates more egalitarian approaches to gender roles in family life, leading to a less strict view of gender difference. Only 2% of evangelicals would be considered strict essentialists, or those who “did not qualify or hedge their belief in gender hierarchy and difference...that difference and hierarchy are God’s design” (Gallagher 2003, 73). In terms of evangelicals’ embrace of egalitarianism, which emphasizes the “mutual submission” of husband and wife to God in which neither takes a dominant role, only about 5% fall into this category. 87% of evangelicals believe that “marriage is an equal partnership,” while 78% support equal partnership and male headship at the same time (Gallagher 2003, 75). More than 90% of evangelicals meld both traditionalism and egalitarianism, while maintaining essentialism or gender hierarchy through a continued emphasis on male headship within family life (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999).

The continued emphasis within evangelical gender ideology on male headship within this “symbolic traditionalism and practical egalitarianism” is particularly interesting given the evidence from a more detailed analysis of daily family practices. The traditional understanding of headship appears to be profoundly altered within the context of current evangelical attitudes toward women’s employment as well as those on decision making, the division of household labor, parenting, and evangelical fatherhood (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Bartkowski 2001, 2007). One woman in Gallagher’s study describes the interplay between simultaneous male headship and equal partnership through the responsibilities of shared housework:

I don’t think headship and...equal partnership are mutually exclusive. I don’t think that if a husband changes a diaper that he loses his headship [laughs]...You know as far as activity is concerned, that doesn’t have anything to do with the headship. You’ve got a family unit that needs to function. Who does it best, who’s got the time, who’s available, who wants to do it? Let’s just get the job done. (Gallagher 2003, 113)



For many, male headship is now maintained through responsibility for loving one's wife and providing guidance and emotional support for both wife and children (Gallagher and Smith 1999, 220; Bartkowski 2001, 2007). Headship is an increasingly psychological and spiritual burden or sacrifice, the success of which is measured through family happiness and is judged or accounted for by God. Two husbands quoted in Gallagher's study (2003) embody two primary models of headship found in today's evangelical families. The first respondent describes headship in language of spiritual leadership:

The only special responsibility I think that the man has in the family is [that] in the Bible it clearly states that he's the spiritual head of the family... My wife could be it, there's many women that are stronger Christians than men, but I do know that it says that I'm responsible to God for this one...It's just that I got to serve the Lord first, then my wife, then my kids, then my job, then my church. That's the order. (Gallagher 2003, 88)

The second husband describes his understanding of headship as servant leadership, connecting the responsibilities of male headship to the sacrifice of Christ for the church (see also Bartkowski 2001, 2007):

Headship is like Christ. Our model for that is Christ. He's a servant. The servant leader, the loving...sacrificial love, that's how I see headship. (Gallagher 2003, 89)

If for whatever reason the husband fails to fulfill this role, his wife can take over. It is still ultimately the responsibility of the male, however, and God will hold him accountable for his family's success and happiness (Gallagher and Smith 1999, 220–221).<sup>2</sup> Here again male headship is sustained in the expectation that the man of the house will bear the responsibility of spiritual leadership, accompanied by an egalitarian qualification that if he cannot fulfill this role at a given time, his wife can support him by assuming the leadership role.

## ANALYSIS

### Postmodern Identities: Agency and Volunteerism

The overlapping and synthesizing of traditionalism and egalitarianism in evangelical gender relations (such as the contradiction of affirming marriage as an equal partnership and male headship simultaneously) can shed

light on the complex interactions of cultural and religious influences that constitute the processes of evangelical identity construction and maintenance. Identity is the means by which we navigate the world. We experience life around us as distinct selves, and piece together who those selves are by determining where we fit in. In a very real sense, our identities are cognitive maps that orient us in time and space, and give direction as well as content to our projects and aspirations. These maps are always in flux, as the terrain around us is constantly changing. Thus we are perpetually redrawing our cognitive maps and reconstructing our identities in response to changes in the landscape of our society and within our personal experience (Ammerman 2003).

Identity formation fits one's own needs and experiences, including the traditions, values, or mores transmitted via the social institutions such as schools, churches, and religious groups in which one is socialized. We create and recreate our identities through the stories we tell about ourselves, particularly through autobiographical narratives that are situated in and linked to the context of stories and public narratives transmitted by the institutions of which we are members (Somers 1994). As such, we build narratives that are constructed through our own initiative but that are structured by public narratives already present in the society and groups of which we are a part. In this intersection of personal and public, individual and social, pre-existing narratives are recast and new ones are created:

We may understand identities as emerging, then, at the everyday intersections of autobiographical and public narratives. We tell stories about ourselves (both literally and through our behavior) that signal both our uniqueness and our membership, that exhibit the consistent themes that characterize us and the unfolding improvisation of the given situation. Each situation, in turn, has its own story, a public narrative shaped by the culture and institutions of which it is a part, with powerful persons and prescribed roles establishing the plot, but surprises and dilemmas that may create gaps in the script or cast doubt on the proffered identity narratives of the participants. Both the individual and the collectivity are structured and remade in those everyday interactions. (Ammerman 2003, 215)



Modern religious agents have been characterized as “tinkerers” (Wuthnow 2007) and “seekers” (Roof 1993, 1999) who create the religious worlds they inhabit as bricolages, or worlds constructed and “improvised” from a variety of cultural resources (Wuthnow 2007). Robert Wuthnow and Wade Clark Roof’s research into the spiritual lives of the Baby Boomer generation, and Wuthnow’s recent forays into those of twenty- and thirty-somethings, suggest that people today are engaging religion differently than the generations that came before them. Religious identities today are generally more achieved or voluntary in nature rather than ascribed; individualism, self-initiation, and choice continue to be central characteristics in the spiritual lives of many Americans (Bellah et al. 1985; Roof 1993, 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987; Warner 1993). Religious actors engage in bricolage construction, utilizing a “cultural tool kit” comprised of the variety of narratives, symbols, traditions, and worldviews that their culture provides. In a society as pluralistic as the United States, an abundance of tools in the tool kit allow individuals to construct “strategies of action” (Swidler 1986), the cognitive maps that orient them and give direction in religious and non-religious endeavors.

While not all evangelicals (and non-evangelicals) can be assumed to have consciously reflected on the sources of their understandings of gender, how those understandings are constructed, and the ways in which they are enacting those views, some evangelicals interviewed in ethnographic studies by Brenda Brasher, R. Marie Griffith, and Julie Ingersoll show awareness of where certain perspectives on gender roles come from, who benefits and who is disempowered by them, and how they are being maintained and/or manipulated in present debates about gender in evangelicalism.<sup>3</sup> Although subconscious absorption, alteration, and repetition of the cultural influences around us is a large part of how worldviews are built—and such a lack of awareness is also evident in many of the respondents in the ethnographic studies and the in-depth interviews of the EIIP—we cannot presume that the construction of gender in evangelicalism is not in some part conscious, and this realization is important for considering how evangelical individuals use gender perspectives to their own benefit, whether to empower themselves or to disempower others.

Due to the biblical imperative to engage the world but remain not of it, evangelicals face a unique challenge in constructing identities from this myriad of resources

both within and outside of evangelical traditions. They must find strategies or maps that allow them to both be fully integrated into the wider culture while remaining within the boundaries of what is evangelical, or what is considered to be a “biblical” way of life. Bartkowski has likened this “balancing act” between being in the world yet remaining not of it as being on “a razor’s edge” (2007, 154). Through this balancing act, evangelicals must find what works in the particular situations in which they might find themselves. For many, this occurs within a social location that does not greatly differ from that of their non-evangelical counterparts. Within a similar social location and relational networks (Smith et al. 1998), evangelicals share a common cultural tool kit with other (non-evangelical) Americans when constructing their identities.<sup>4</sup> The many symbols that they draw from include these broad cultural values and symbols shared with non-evangelicals, and those values and symbols that are central to evangelical identity—historically significant ideas such as male-headship, gender essentialism, and biblical inerrancy.<sup>5</sup>

Evangelicals have gleaned resources from the cultural tool kit with historical significance and power within the evangelical tradition, as well as a variety of available public narratives that serve as important sources in the construction of gender identity and “strategies of action” used to successfully navigate family life and relationships between families and their communities. Wider cultural resources or public narratives shared with the dominant culture include perspectives stemming from major women’s movements, which have resulted in a general rejection of male superiority and the widely accepted belief that women should be treated as men’s equals in American society. Although much of the change in opinions concerning women’s employment and the egalitarian distribution of housework and child support can be attributed to wide-spread economic changes that have affected the middle class since the mid-1970s, even those evangelicals who express negative opinions of modern feminist movements have been deeply affected by its legacy, such as egalitarianism among the sexes as a basic cultural value (Bendroth 1993, Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2004; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Wilcox 1989).<sup>6</sup>

In the “symbolic traditionalism and practical egalitarianism” found by Gallagher and Smith and supported by Bartkowski, we can see ideas transmitted from evangelical traditions intersecting the wider cultural resources outside church and family life, shaping gender





relations that work for evangelical men and women within the complex context of their daily lives. Traditional evangelical gender ideology (gender essentialism) is reincarnated within the symbols and meanings—including male headship—evangelicals attach to everyday family experience, activities, and responsibilities. These symbols also connect evangelicals to something that transcends the everyday concerns in which they are embedded. An evangelical father working full-time so that his wife might devote herself to raising their children is not simply performing a task that must be done for financial and practical purposes. These acts have been interpreted by many evangelical men and women in the vein of sacrifice, one through which the male head of the household imitates the sacrifice of Christ. Such male self-sacrifice is linked to the admonishment to love one's wife as Christ loved the church (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999; Bartkowski 2001, 2004, 2007). This establishes a connection to the divine, a direct link to transcendent meaning that goes beyond the significance of performing the activity for the sake of getting it done or to make ends meet. The religious identities of the performers of these tasks are then reinforced in unexpected ways through the fusion of activities that we might typically label as non-religious or mundane, and the religiously significant symbolism attributed to them (Munson 2007; Ammerman 2003).

### **Maintaining the Sacred Boundary**

In identifying as evangelical, one is tied to a collective identity that is continually transformed by its members. This group identity is not merely the sum of identity work occurring on the individual level; personal identities are formed within the contexts and through the influence of important reference groups in our lives. Groups by nature have boundaries, those that separate persons who belong in the group from those who do not. Maintaining group boundaries is part of the balancing act evangelicals must engage in to remain not of the world or mainstream culture despite their deep level of engagement with it. Without such boundaries, evangelicals would no longer exist as a distinct group discernable from any other. This distinctiveness is particularly essential for evangelicals, because a sense of morally-based otherness from non-evangelicals has been part of the “cultural DNA” of evangelicalism throughout its history. Some have argued that this emphasis on distinctiveness from the mainstream culture may also be largely responsible for a great deal of evangelicalism's success (Smith et al. 1998).

Since individual identity work takes place within and through the groups of which we are members, group attempts to maintain boundaries that keep evangelicals from being of the world are also at play in the identity work carried out among individual evangelical believers and their families. But if evangelical family practices are not unlike those of non-evangelicals, and evangelicals are very similar in their social location and level of embeddedness in the mainstream of American culture, how do evangelicals remain distinct as a group?

Anthony Cohen (1985) suggests that as groups become structurally similar to others that lie outside of their boundaries, efforts to symbolically separate who/what is of the group and who/what does not belong within its borders become more strenuous: “the greater the pressure on communities to modify their structural form...the more they are inclined to reassert their boundaries symbolically by imbuing those forms with meaning and significance....In other words, as the structural bases of boundary become blurred, so the symbolic bases are strengthened” (Cohen 1985, 44). To remain distinct, evangelicals engage in efforts to build up what symbolically separates them from non-evangelicals.

Emmanuel Sivan, in his analysis of Protestant fundamentalist construction and maintenance of symbolic boundaries, employs the metaphor of a “wall of virtue” to describe boundary maintenance through assertions of moral otherness from mainstream culture. According to Sivan, conservative Protestants use shorthand terms in everyday conversation, such as “biblical standard,” “Christian home,” and “bible believers,” to serve as collectively constructed markers of who is in and who is out, who roots their way of life in the Word of God and who does not (Sivan 2004, 18). These boundary markers point to specific shared understandings that are not immediately understood or self-evident to outsiders, and thus they separate those who are initiated in the shared understandings of the group from those who are not. The boundary or wall of virtue separating evangelicals from non-evangelicals and non-biblical ways of being is comprised of beliefs that construct evangelicalism as a morally superior form of life (superior in that it is bible-based and therefore approved by God). Those beliefs include male headship, servant leadership, mutual submission, and biblical manhood and womanhood. This symbolic traditionalism allows evangelicals to keep the group boundary strong while living up to the biblical imperative to be in the world but not of it (Gallagher 2003, 2004; Gallagher and Smith 1999).<sup>7</sup>



By constructing gendered identities through symbols central to collective evangelical identity since evangelicalism's inception (DeBerg 1990) and that are understood to be rooted in the biblical past, evangelicals re-imagine and reconfigure tradition in a way that complements their contemporary lives and unique needs while allowing them to maintain connections to a group identity moored within a historical institution. This also strengthens a sense of connection to a rich historical past because believers use symbols that point to a stream of tradition stretching back to the first century CE, linking them to the formative period of Christianity, a time believed to be the most authentic and authoritative form of Christianity as practiced by Christ and those who followed his example soon after the resurrection. Retaining traditional language and symbols that evangelical faith roots in this historical thread allows contemporary evangelical men and women to orient themselves within it and count themselves as part of a true, biblical Christian lineage, a public narrative in which individuals enact their own autobiographical narratives as members of the evangelical tradition (Ammerman 2003, 217).

## CONCLUSION

As with the data contained in the studies discussed, emphasis on subcultural identity theories and the collective construction of gender by a creative mixing of both evangelical and wider cultural influences in this analysis is by no means exhaustive of the explanations available of how evangelicals are constructing and performing gender. Most notable are the considerations given to the power relations that exist between men (particularly male church leaders) and women in conservative evangelical churches and groups in the works of Brasher (1998), Griffith (1997), and Ingersoll (2003), and the role power relations (and the benefits and losses that stem from them) play in the maintenance and rejection of certain gender ideologies and practices. Ethnographic studies of women's evangelical groups provide a more complex picture of the processes by which women negotiate their religious tradition's emphasis on gender hierarchy and female submission and their own needs for personal empowerment and spiritual inspiration.

In Brasher (1998) and Griffith (1997) in particular, more restrictive understandings of female submission to the male head of the home were often stated as the Biblical ideal (as opposed to the evangelical or biblical feminist position of mutual submission). Yet for the women who embraced female submission, submission

was not a source of disempowerment, but rather a source for creating their perception of existing power relations in a way that allowed them a greater sense of freedom and religious fulfillment. These women exemplified female submission with a twist—for them, enacting roles that were in opposition and submission to those of their male leaders provided them with a space of their own, a “women's only” enclave within church life that allowed for the comfortable and supportive exploration of their spirituality and, often, the difficulties faced in their relationships, in an environment free of men. For many in Griffith's study, submitting before their husbands and God as the ultimate male figure head and the acceptance of this gender hierarchy became an act of personal empowerment that allowed them to let go of the frustrations associated with things they could not control and move on with their lives with a renewed hope that a loving, fatherly God would provide them with what was needed. They believed that it was often not the hearts of the men in their lives that needed to change, but rather their own attitude and acceptance of these men would heal their relationships (Griffith 1997).

Evangelicals fulfill gender roles that both resemble those of many non-evangelical American families and yet are uniquely evangelical in that they are motivated by and experienced through the lens of biblical imperatives. By doing so, evangelical men and women establish narratives and strategies of action that link them to a tradition and past of biblical authenticity, and provide them with the tools they need for personal growth, empowerment, and direction. In addition, this creative and integrative process of gender construction allows them simultaneously to adhere to a conservative religious tradition while remaining fully engaged in contemporary American mainstream culture in a way that keeps them sufficiently distinct from non-evangelicals—to be in the world but not of it.

The identity and boundary work of evangelicals highlights the complexity of interactions between private, family, and public lives, and how these layers of experience alter our sense of self by providing a space and a well-spring of resources for narrative recreation. The power of religion within the personal and public narratives of contemporary persons like the evangelicals discussed here speaks to the continued importance of religion as a source for individual and collective constructions of meaning and moral direction in a complex world.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term “traditional” as used here should not be understood as implying that these beliefs have been eternal or static in any way. “Traditional” simply means that these gender perspectives have dominated conservative Protestant thought since the Victorian Era (DeBerg 1990). Their content, however, has changed throughout evangelical history, from the 1920s onward. The shifts described here are merely their most recent incarnation.

<sup>2</sup>See Bartkowski 2004 and 2007 for an emphasis on “expressive masculinity” in the Promise Keepers movement, and Bartkowski and Xu 2000 for similar changes in evangelical fatherhood.

<sup>3</sup>For example, some women interviewed in Ingersoll’s study rejected the characterizations of gender and gender roles as elucidated by their congregational leaders by reinterpreting the same idea or particular Biblical passage on male/female relations in a way that better serves their own situations and goals at home or in church life. When asked how they reconcile their congregation’s teachings against women’s direct instruction of (and therefore authority over) men in religious education classes, some of the women interviewed responded that interpretations of Paul’s positions on female teaching were essentially misinterpreted; one cited a mistranslation of the original Greek as an issue, while others qualified what was meant by the word “teach” and the nature of having authority over others that exists in the act of instructing someone religiously. The latter was interpreted by several in light of Paul’s statements of male and female equality in Christ, thus tempering other passages that might contribute to the limitation of women’s roles in activities both within and without church life (Ingersoll 2003, 23–25).

<sup>4</sup>Some theories posited about evangelicalism’s success suggest that evangelicalism’s vitality is due to its “sheltered enclave” characteristics in terms of social location and how its members interact with mainstream culture—that the social location of evangelicals is one of “distance from modernity” (Hunter 1983). James Davidson Hunter claims that higher education, participation in paid labor, living in an urban environment, younger age, and higher income (among other demographic factors) suggest that one more fully participates in the conditions of

modern life. Hunter concluded that evangelicals were more distant in these measures than other groups and that this separation from mainstream culture allowed them to protect their religious beliefs from the eroding effects of pluralism and secularization, key features of Western mainstream culture in the modern era. The findings of Smith et al. contradict these assertions. In terms of higher education, income, and participation in paid labor force, evangelicals are closer in proximity to modernity than non-religious Americans, and do not differ consistently in these regards to other Christian groups. Evangelicals do not live in a sheltered enclave in terms of their relational networks either. They do not restrict their social worlds to fellow evangelicals or other Christians any more so than liberal or mainline American Protestants (Smith et al. 1998, 75–82).

<sup>5</sup>The vast majority of evangelicals (97 percent) adhere to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, but what inerrancy actually means varies. Roughly half view the Bible as literally true, while the other upholds the Bible as true, though not always literally so (Smith et al. 1998).

<sup>6</sup>This is not to suggest that a majority or even a large portion of evangelicals are antagonistic toward feminist social movements or feminist ideologies. Multiple evangelical feminist movements have emerged throughout the history of evangelical tradition, and evangelical or “biblical feminists” continue to be an important group within evangelicalism today (see Gallagher 2003, 2004a). Clyde Wilcox’s study (1989) of the attitudes of white Protestant evangelical women on feminist issues (including the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, birth control information in public schools) and feminist organizations (including the National Organization for Women) unearthed a great diversity of opinions concerning these issues and mixed levels of support for feminist and antifeminist groups. Wilcox compared support for the National Organization for Women (NOW) and that for the Moral Majority. Only 22 percent of the women supported NOW and only 17 percent favored the Moral Majority. A large majority of women in this study supported neither (62 percent). Gallagher’s (2004b) findings lend further support for the diversity of evangelical (male and female) opinion regarding feminism. Even those who do not support feminist organizations acknowledge positive political and



social results of popular women's movements in the United States (Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2004b).

<sup>7</sup>See Bartkowski 2004 and 2007 for boundary work done by men of the Promise Keepers to remain distinct from non-evangelical fathers.



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